

The Origins of The Washington Color School

by

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Prepared for the DC Digital Museum of the Humanities May 2015

The District of Columbia is a cultural melting pot, with few markers of local accomplishment. The visual arts movement known as the Washington Color School is rivaled only by Go-Go music in local pride and national importance. The Color School's inception and development connects D.C. to local and national trends in the arts, race, gender, and politics.

The first major exhibit gathering Color School paintings in Washington DC occurred at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art (WGMA), a briefly influential museum and gallery. The WGMA opened in October 1962, at 1503 21st Street NW, with a show of artwork by Franz Kline and three nights of star-studded parties. The gallery was an early project of local arts champion Alice Denney, and Denney served as founding assistant director. The new museum's first director was respected Baltimore-based curator Adelyn Breeskin, and the WGMA's board chair was physicist Julian Eisenstein. Frank Getlein wrote about the opening for *The Evening Star*,

"Like the museum, the exhibition, with a few reservations, was very well received by the invited audience of artists and arts writers. The artists easily outnumbered the writers. Among those present were David Smith, sculptor, and New York painters Mark Rothko, Helen Frankenthaler and Barnett Newman, all exponents of the abstract expressionist manner in which Mr. Kline was an internationally recognized leader... Local artists at the opening included Robert Gates and James Twitty. Meeting the guests were the staff and many of the trustees of the new gallery."

The WGMA was founded as a home for new and adventurous artwork, and in its first year the gallery produced one of the earliest performance "happenings" in the region (by Robert Rauschenberg) and the influential exhibition of Van Gogh paintings that went on to form the core collection at the Van Gogh Museum (in Amsterdam.)

From before the opening the WGMA forged connections to the Kennedy administration. President Kennedy directed his Special Consultant on the Arts to attend and speak at the black tie opening, which was also attended by Defense Secretary McNamara, Labor Secretary Wirtz, President Kennedy's mother-in-law Mrs. Auchincloss, and Dean Acheson (former Secretary of State).

The WGMA's founding Director (Breeskin) left after just two years in a tussle regarding control and direction, and the trustees quickly hired critic, curator, and art historian Gerald Nordland to succeed her. Nordland stayed at the WGMA for just a single year, departing to lead the new San Francisco Museum of Arts, but in that year he organized arguably the most important show of D.C. artists ever: The Washington Color Painters.

The Washington Color Painters Exhibit

Nordland's Washington Color Painters exhibition at the WGMA included work by Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Tom Downing, Howard Mehring, Gene Davis, and Paul Reed. The show was open for 57 days, and the Gallery reported total attendance of 3,560. Critical praise for the show included a piece by Elisabeth Stevens in *Arts Magazine*, and by Andrew Hudson (twice) in the *Washington Post*. In his Sunday *Post* article Hudson writes,

"I would rank the exhibition of 'The Washington Color Painters' now at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art among the most interesting and stimulating exhibitions I've seen in the past year. As a sampling of some of the latest and best abstract painting, it's a must for all those in the city who are interested in art. But it's also (and I think I am in a position to say this, as a newcomer) something of an artistic landmark for Washington, something for Washingtonians to be proud of."

An Albers exhibition at the WGMA later that year (open for the same length of time) had stronger attendance (4,300), but the Color Painters show quickly encouraged copycat shows of color school artwork. After The Washington Color Painters closed at the WGMA the exhibit circulated to the University of Texas Art Galleries in Austin, the University of California in Santa Barbara, Rose Art Gallery at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, and Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

The Washington color painters were part of a larger Color School movement that gained popularity in the early 1960's. The roots of the Color School are closely identified with art critic Clement Greenberg who invented the terminology defining it, and championed select early Color School artists.

Clement Greenberg and the Color School

Arts writer Clement Greenberg was an influential critic and essayist interpreting the arts from the 1940's to 1970's. In the early 1960's when Pop Art and Action Painting (think: Warhol and Pollock) dominated the New York art scene, Greenberg championed Post-Painterly Abstraction (his term) and Color Field painters (his term).

The terms 'Color Field' and 'Color School' describe a subset of the artworks and artists identified within Post-Painterly Abstraction. Color artists share a visual

aesthetic based on how they worked with the canvas and the color and type of paints they worked with. Many Color paintings of the 1960's were created with what was then a new type of paint (Magna) that allowed for the use of watercolor technique on canvas. Magna is acrylic resin paint, and many of the artists applied the paint to untreated canvas in color bands.

Not everyone appreciated the results. Curator and critic Hardy S. George wrote, "A strict formal analysis of their works presents hardly more than a decorative combination of color that

bears no relationship to nature or the subjective feelings of the artist. If this is the case, how can their work be distinguished from well-designed wall-paper?" Nevertheless, Greenberg's values gained traction. While the Color School existed across the country, the Washington Color School was a subset identified by the WGA exhibition.

The Washington Color School banner validated local artists, collectors, and their supporters, and it quickly grew to encapsulate dozens of artists not in any way associated with the initial exhibit. Even while the Color Painters was up at the WGA a small Alexandria gallery (the Henri) held a Color painters exhibition of mostly unrelated artists. Mary Meyer, a mistress of JFK and the sister-in-law of *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee, was an identified Washington Color School painter. Major local philanthropist Calvin Cafritz was married at the time to Enid Sanford, whose abstract paintings became closely connected to the Washington Color School. The WGA's own Alice Denney was married to collector George Denney, a top CIA official at the time.



*"Black Rhythm" by Gene Davis, magna on canvas, 1964
Collection of the Central Intelligence Agency (Wikimedia)*

The Washington Color School concept was usefully accessible, and the term is currently applied to a range of abstract painting created by Washington region artists. That was not the case in the 1960's.

The Color School, Gender, and Race

All of the Color School painters promoted by critic Clement Greenberg, and all of the painters included in the WGMA's Color Painters show, were white men. Arts writer Barbara Rose wrote that Clement Greenberg "never promoted a woman or an artist of color, and all evidence points to the fact that he was a prejudiced misogynist." Curator and art historian Hardy S. George concurred and added that for this reason, "By the late 1960's Greenberg's opinions on contemporary art were not considered credible by a number of artists and critics."

When it was initially formulated, The Washington Color School nomenclature enshrined a particular cultural subset, excluding some of the most talented DC-based painters. Circling the painters included in the first Washington Color Painters as "Washington" painters is itself suspect because as Barbara Rose noted, "By the time the show Washington Color Painters was held in 1965, Kenneth Noland had moved to Vermont in 1961, and Morris Louis had died."

The Washington Gallery of Modern Art foundered soon after Nordland left. The gallery director hired to replace Nordland had little arts-world expertise, or influence, and the cultural landscape around the museum had also changed. President Kennedy had been assassinated, and the culture of Camelot was being replaced by its mythology. Paul Richard, in a *Washington Post* article (September 8, 1968) announcing the merger of the Corcoran and WGMA writes,

"The problem is that although the gallery has prospered, the exhibition of contemporary art in Washington has prospered even more. The Gallery was founded to fight a battle. That battle has been won."

The Washington Gallery of Modern Art ceased operations the last day of June 1967, and the permanent collection – including many Color School works – was moved to the Oklahoma Art Museum.

Conclusions

The Washington Gallery of Modern Art was an arts home for DC's best and brightest, and the Washington Color School of today would not exist had it not been identified and heralded by top critics and curators of the time. The racist origins of the Color School movement are troubling and may never be fully understood or honestly challenged. This project's survey of journalism covering the Washington Color School

1963–1968 confirms that arts journalists strongly influence public opinion of artists and art works.

About the Project

A grant provided to Day Eight by the Humanities Council of Washington supporting the fifth annual DC Student Arts Journalism Challenge supported research and analysis regarding the impact of arts journalism on the cultural history of Washington, DC. The project culminated in a public conversation on the future of arts journalism and the role of arts journalism in creating the Washington Color School between project scholar Philip Kennicott (*Washington Post*), Michael McCarthy (*DC Magazine*) and project director Robert Bettmann held in partnership with the Washington Project for the Arts October 27, 2014, at the Capitol Skyline Hotel. This paper was prepared for publication in the Digital Museum of the Humanities Council of Washington, DC.

About the Author

Robert Bettmann is the founder of the non-profit Day Eight. He is the author of *Somatic Ecology: Somatics, Nature, Humanity and the Human Body* and editor of *Bourgeon: Fifty Artists Write About Their Work*. Robert received a BA in Environmental Studies from Oberlin College, an MA in Dance from American University and the certificate in Public and Non Profit Management from Georgetown University. To learn more about Robert and Day Eight, visit <http://www.DayEight.org>.

